

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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TAGS: PINT, SOPN, AR

SUBJECT: FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN ARGENTINA

REF: A. BUENOS AIRES 11953

B. BUENOS AIRES 6154 AUGUST 21, 1973

1. SUMMARY: A NEW GOVERNMENT DECREE HAS BROUGHT INTO SHARP FOCUS THE PRECARIOUS STATE OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN ARGENTINA. TOGETHER WITH OTHER RECENT EVENTS IT POINTS TO A CONCERTED GOA CAMPAIGN TO BRING THE NEWS MEDIA UNDER STRICTER GOVERNMENT CONTROL. THE PRESENT SITUATION REPRESENTS A SERIOUS THREAT TO ALREADY PRECARIOUS FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN ARGENTINA.

2. ON MAY 14 THE GOA ISSUED EXECUTIVE DECREE 1273 CREATING A NEWS AGENCY REGISTRY GIVING IT MORE CONTROL OVER NEWS REPORTING. THE NEW DECREE REQUIRES ALL LOCAL AND FOREIGN NEWS AGENCIES, THEIR BRANCHES AND REPRESENTATIVES, TO REGISTER WITH THE PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECRETARY'S OFFICE WITHIN 90 DAYS. IT WAS PUBLISHED IN THE GOA'S "OFFICIAL BULLETIN" (BOLETIN OFICIAL) ON MAY 20, 1975 MAKING THAT ITS EFFECTIVE DATE. THE NEW DECREE SUPPLEMENTS AND EXPANDS RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED THROUGH EXECUTIVE

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DECREE 587 OF AUGUST 20, 1973 REPORTED IN REF B.

3. THE KEY ELEMENT IN THE DECREE IS ARTICLE FOUR WHICH SAYS "DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN NEWS MEDIA ARE FORBIDDEN TO CARRY NEWS ABOUT ARGENTINA SUPPLIED BY FOREIGN NEWS AGENCIES." DECREE 1273 PROVIDES PENALTIES RANGING FROM SUSPENSION FROM THE REGISTRY, TO EXPULSION OF THE OFFENDING FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT. LOCAL MEDIA USING PROHIBITED MATERIALS WILL BE SUBJECT TO "TEMPORARY SUSPENSION OF PRINTING, CIRCULATION, AND DISTRIBUTION."

4. THE DECREE CONCLUDES WITH ADMIRABLE NEWSPEAK THAT "IT IS THE GOVERNMENT'S DUTY TO GUARANTEE THAT IDEAS ARE FREELY EXPRESSED IN A CLIMATE OF TRUE REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY," AND "TO CARRY OUT THIS CONSTITUTIONAL ORDER, THE PEOPLE MUST BE SUPPLIED WITH TRUE INFORMATION."

5. LOCAL MEDIA REACTION TO THE MEASURE HAS BEEN UNIVERSALLY NEGATIVE. BOTH "LA PRENSA" AND "LA NACION" HAVE CONDEMNED IT EDITORIALY AS A VIOLATION OF ARTICLES 11 AND 32 OF THE ARGENTINE CONSTITUTION, WITH "PRENSA" MAKING OPE ACID COMMENT THAT "THE TRUTH DOESN'T NEED TO BE PROTECTED, BECAUSE IT PREVAILS NATURALLY IF THERE IS FREEDOM." "LA PRENSA" ADDS THAT "...IN THE FACE OF THE MERE POSSIBILITY THAT A STORY MAY PROVE OBJECTIONABLE, THE GOVERNMENT OPTS FOR THE ABSURDITY OF SUPRESSING ALLINFORMATION..." AND CONCLUDES THAT "THE FIRST VICTIM OF THIS NEW TRANSGRESSION OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS WILL BE THE GOVERNMENT ITSELF."

6. "LA NACION" IN A LENGTHY, WELL-REASONED EDITORIAL INVOKES A SERIES OF LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE DECREE CONCLUDING THAT IT IS "AMBIGUOUS, ARBITRARY, AND ABSURD."

7. OTHER EVENTS HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE RAPID DETERIORATION OF GOVERNMENT-PRESS RELATIONS IN THE LAST FEW DAYS. A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE ON GOVERNMENT CONTROLLED TELEVISION LAST WEEKEND WARNED VIEWERS THAT "SUBVERSIVE ORGANIZATIONS ARE USING SOME MEDIA IN THEIR EFFORTS TO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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INFLUENCE THE MASSES." THE AD THEN CLEARLY SHOWS SOMEONE BUYING COPIES OF "LA OPINION" AND "CRONISTA COMERCIAL." LEST ANYONE MISS THE MESSAGE, THE LOGOTYPES OF THESE TWO PUBLICATIONS APPEAR ON THE SCREEN AND THE VOICE-OVER CONTINUES "THERE ARE NEWSPAPERS THAT DISGUISE, THROUGH CONDITIONED SUPPORT OF SOME GOVERNMENT ACTIONS, THE CORROSIVE SLANT THEY GIVE TO THEIR STORIES." THE AD DREW A STORM OF PUBLIC PROTEST AND WAS QUICKLY WITHDRAWN

BUT THE POINT WAS MADE.

8. PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECRETARY JOSE VILLONE HAS BEEN VISITING CERTAIN NEWSPAPERS ("NACION," "OPINION," "CRONISTA COMERCIAL") AND COMPLAINING ABOUT THEIR EDITORIAL CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT. ONE LOCAL WRITER TOLD EMBOF THAT VILLONE WARNED OF DIRE CONSEQUENCES IF THE CRITICISM DOES NOT STOP. THE GOA HAS OFTEN USED ITS ENORMOUS ADVERTISING BUDGET TO "PUNISH" OFFENDING NEWSPAPERS BY WITHDRAWING OR WITHHOLDING OFFICIAL ADVERTISING FROM THEM. "LA PRENSA" AND "LA OPINION" ARE CURRENTLY SUFFERING THIS FATE.

9. THE ASSASSINATION OF "LA OPINION" ECONOMIC WRITER JORGE MONEY HAS SENT SHOCKWAVES THROUGH THE JOURNALISTIC COMMUNITY. ALTHOUGH THE MOTIVE FOR THE SLAYING IS UNCLEAR, ONE SOURCE TOLD EMBOF THAT MONEY HAD BEEN A MEMBER OF THE LEFTIST PERONIST YOUTH BEFORE JOINING "LA OPINION" AND HAD ONCE WRITTEN A STORY THAT MADE FUN OF LOPEZ REGA.

10. COMMENT. TAKEN TOGETHER, ALL OF THESE INCIDENTS POINT TO A CONCERTED GOA CAMPAIGN TO BRING THE NEWS MEDIA UNDER STRICTER GOVERNMENT CONTROL. DECREE 1273, IF FULLY IMPLEMENTED, WILL SERIOUSLY AFFECT THE OPERATIONS OF ALL FOREIGN NEWS AGENCIES AND CORRESPONDENTS IN ARGENTINA. AT THE VERY LEAST IT CAN'T HELP BUT INTIMIDATE THEM AND THEIR LOCAL END USERS WHO FACE SIMILAR PENALTIES. THE PRESENT SITUATION REPRESENTS ANOTHER TIGHTENING OF THE NOOSE AROUND THE NECK OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN ARGENTINA.

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